

# Classroom strategies in teaching the media

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## Abstract

This article is based on Chapter 5 of my book *Media and Digital Literacies in Secondary School* (2013). The chapter has been shortened and rewritten in some parts for the article. The article focuses on different classroom strategies identified during the ethnographic school research in one of the Finnish secondary schools carried out during the academic year 2009–2010. The study indicates that teachers analyse and produce media texts as key strategies in media education. In the article, I will give examples of an advertisement project, a soap opera drama, an animation project, a „life career assignment” and a newspaper strategy in different learning settings. All examples indicate that media education needs to build a strong bridge between youth and school culture and that technology in the school follows the content of learning.

*Keywords:* media education, media technology, school, learning

## Introduction

This article is drawn from my book *Media and Digital Literacies in Secondary School* (Kupiainen, 2013) and is not an original research paper. The book was based on ethnography that was conducted at the Maple School (a pseudonym) in the western part of Finland during the school year 2009–2010. The research focus was young people’s media practices in the school. It is well known that young people in media saturated countries use many different media devices and content on a daily basis, usually in their free time out of school. The media environment at the school is different and usually arranged by the school administration and teachers. Digital

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technologies in schools are usually formalised and bounded by the nature of the administration, as well as derived from „top-down’ pressures and external imperatives that are only partially related to matters of teaching and learning”, as Selwyn (2011a, p. 25) found in his studies. Selwyn has referred to numerous surveys and reports which confirm that the use of digital technology in schools is far away from students’ own experiences and „real-world” technology use. It is „often focused on matters of school management and administration rather than teaching and learning” (Selwyn, 2011b, p. 25). Additionally, digital technologies are used more and more to monitor students’ performance through testing and to even shape „the behaviours and subjectivities of young people in schools” (Williamson, 2014, p. 91). Williamson speaks about *digital governance* as centralised control of learning.

In my research, I am interested in students’ own media practices that they bring into the school and how the school and formal learning environments are structured to deal with these practices. Digital technologies in school include more than those implemented by school administration-regulated ICT. They include student mobile devices, digital and video cameras, and voice recorders, which are devices that young people are used to using in their homes and free time. Digital technologies and their content are also subjects of teaching and learning, especially in media education and teaching and learning about the media. In this special issue of „digital technologies in schools”, I chose a chapter in which the focus is on different media education or media literacy education techniques used in the Maple School. These techniques partly utilise students’ own media practices and enhance students’ media literacy towards media content, such as advertisements. In this article, digital technology in the school is understood from the perspective of media education. I believe that sharing some methods and lived experiences from the school in the Finnish context will help researchers understand the meaning and challenges of media education in schools and in the realm of digital technology.

I focus particularly on curriculum-based media education during school classes. Buckingham (2003) referred to six basic teaching techniques that usually suit school curriculum in the media education context. These are textual analysis, contextual analysis, case studies, translations, simulations and production. During my research, I focused on simulation, production and textual analysis in a mother tongue class, a special movie course and a visual arts class.

In the Finnish national core curriculum (Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004, Chapter 7), media education is not a school subject but

a so-called cross-curricular theme that has been taught primarily in the visual arts and mother tongue classes. The name of the cross-curricular theme in a comprehensive school is „media skills and communication”. It is one of six other cross-curricular themes. The 2004 national core curriculum does not include information and communication technology as a subject area, but it is usually integrated within media skills and communication and some school subjects.

## **Method**

I observed from 3 to 10 hours a week in the Maple School, mainly mother tongue and visual arts lessons, because digital and media technologies were explicit in these classes. The most regularly observed group was a cohort of eighth grade students, who also had an optional movie course as part of their curriculum.

The basis of my data includes handwritten observational field notes taken during observations and at the end of each day. During my ethnographic fieldwork, I also conducted 34 semi-structured interviews: 26 with students and 8 with teachers. All interviews and some of the lessons in the school were recorded by a digital audio recorder and transcribed afterwards. During my observations, I used video and still cameras in some cases as well. For example, I filmed seventh grade students when they presented their own soap opera improvisations in a mother tongue language class and students making a film in the video course. A still camera was used mainly in corridors outside of the classrooms. I also photographed some of the students' work that was created in different classes. Additionally, I gathered students' media analyses, essays, and the video films that they created themselves and with their peers. My ethnography was preceded by a quantitative survey ( $N = 305$ ) on media used amongst the participants.

### **An advertisement project with Grade 8 students**

Textual analysis is one of the most frequently used techniques of media teaching. As Buckingham (2003) wrote, textual analysis means „making the familiar strange” (p. 71). The idea for „un-familiarising” the text is to establish a critical distance between the text and the student. Usually, it means that the student has to approach the text from a new perspective. For example, audiovisual media, such as a film clip, can be observed through

focusing on camera angles, editing, or sound effects and music. Changing the traditional viewers' position opens new interpretations for the text.

My first example is an advertisement project in the mother tongue class of Grade 8 students. In the mother tongue class, the emphasis was on the literacy studies, language and the rhetoric of advertisements. In fact, advertising messages were included in the broader study of propaganda, persuasion, and impacts of language and media. This broader context included students studying argumentation, letters to editors, media knowledge, debates, literature and literacy skills. Media analysis and especially a formal study of advertising were included in the eighth grade mother tongue textbook.

Using advertisements as a learning material is also an example of the so-called new basics of literacy learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). *New basics* focuses learning in the context of contemporary society, the world of multimodal communications, variations in appropriate communication settings and a diverse range of media. Besides the *old basics* mode of literacy learning of phonetic rules, correct spelling and grammar, there is a lifeworld of students, in which they are audiences and producers of a variety of different texts with different media devices in different platforms. Therefore, literacy learning also needs new settings and variety, and media education is easily integrated into literacy learning.

The students' assignment in the advertisement project was to make a close reading of the meanings of the media texts and to use their findings to produce their own advertisement. This kind of approach uses all the above-mentioned strategies: analysis, production and simulation.

The class started with textual analysis. The objective that the teacher set for the students was to understand how a text constructs meaning. Buckingham (2003) pointed out that textual analysis usually has three steps. The analysis begins with a description: „Students are asked to identify and list everything they can see and hear in the text.” The focus is partly on the use of settings, colour, body image – what is shown – and partly on how it is shown: the use of angle shots, depth of field, composition, lighting and so forth. The second step is to consider the meaning of the text, the third is to make judgments about the text, and all of this is done in a systematic way. These steps help to make the „familiar strange”.

In the advertisement project, the steps were not clearly separated or done in a systematic way. Before the first lectures, students were asked to view TV or magazine advertisements at home. The assignment was presented in a school textbook in the following way:

Choose a youth magazine and explore ads.

- Give all the information about the magazine and present it.
- Find five ads that you suppose to be targeted to you.
- Explore the ads you have chosen and answer the questions: What kind of look should you have according to the advertisement? In what kind of environment should you be living? What kinds of objects should you want to have?
- Make a description of young people to whom ads are targeted.
- Make a short report about TV ads.
- Choose one sporting event, children's show, or food programme that includes advertisements.
- Look at the advertisements, and make a list of products that have been advertised.
- Categorise the products.
- Explain the types of people that the ads are targeting: Who are they? What are they thought to value and want? In what kind of environment are they living? Who belongs in their life? What do they do? (Mikkola, Luukka, & Ahonen, 2006, p. 67)

The goal of the assignment was to elicit students' reflective thinking about the audiences, representations and impacts of the advertisements. The teacher and students discussed the language of advertisements, and some steps of critical media analysis were made in their school textbook:

In this way, you read an advertisement critically:

- Look at what is advertised.
- Explore to whom an ad is targeted.
- Think what are the important things for the target group according to the advertisement.
- Explore what means are used in the advertisement:
  - Lingual means
  - Audio-visual means
  - Content selections
- Explore what the advertisement does not tell you about the product.
- Make your own opinion of the product. (Mikkola et al., 2006, p. 69)

As a visual means, the textbook presents image sizes, colours and shadows, and angle shots. But the emphasis in the assignment was the target group, audience, and how advertisements speak to different audiences. Students also wrote some essays about advertisements.

### Critical analysis of the text

The teacher gave students some headers for the essay. According to the teacher, the most popular headline that students chose for essays was „TV ads – unnecessary complement or necessary advertising?“

In the essays, some students seemed to still think that advertisements are some kind of windows to the world, and they just present the product as it is. They did not understand the nature of representation and how advertisements offer reading positions for the audiences. Some other students had a stronger sense of critical reading and media literacy. They wrote how advertisements use humour, slogans and exaggeration to manipulate emotions and play with gender roles. Female students were especially interested in gender differences and the picture manipulations that they saw in hairspray, shampoo and make-up advertisements:

It seems that in almost all advertisements, women are presenting products. Men never advertise hairspray or shampoo. They only admire the impact of new hairspray or shampoo ... The casting in advertisements where only a woman is present makes me wonder: Do men and women not get along with the same products? Are men not able to use, for example, the same hairspray? (From Grade 8 essays, a female student)

A make-up advertisement is possible to identify in two seconds when beautiful women step onto the screen in a very well-lit make-up studio or in a city landscape. In the advertisements, women are young and skinny, and they have perfect skin prior to being made up. It is made easy by modern image processing. (From Grade 8 essays, a female student)

There were differences between students on how they understood this language. TV and magazine advertisements are one of the easiest ways to start exploring media texts and to enhance media literacy. Students are familiar with ads as part of their everyday experience, but the theoretical framework and concepts are difficult to use in practice.

Previous research has noted that while young people may have more knowledge about advertising, they may not necessarily employ critical thinking skills in their understanding of advertising (Hobbs, 2004). But these findings are controversial, after all. In her study of media literacy in Grade 11 English language arts in the United States, Hobbs (2004) found that students who received media literacy instructions gained an increased

knowledge of the production processes used in advertising, and their ability to critically analyse advertising grew. They demonstrated, for example, the ability to support their arguments with evidence concerning the target audience of the advertisements.

Students in the mother tongue class at the Maple School also indicated critical analysing abilities in identifying the target audience, especially on the grounds of magazine target groups. One of the eighth grade students wrote the following in her essay.

Different magazines have advertisements of products that are targeted to a special group of readers. For example, in women's model magazines are ads for branded clothes, perfumes and cosmetics. In a [local newspaper] are ads for cars and electronics, because men are reading it as well. Youth magazines have ads for music, electronics, food, clothes, etc. And this applies also to media such as magazines. (Part of the essay of an eighth grade girl)

In discussions with the teacher, students pointed out what kinds of items are targeted at young people in various media. Some students clearly thought about advertising and used critical concepts when they analysed ads and discussed the media. But my sample, of course, is not statistically valid, and there is no control group. Therefore, it is not possible to tell if media education and the advertising project in the mother tongue class has any specific influence on students' media knowledge or scepticism towards advertisements.

After all, not all students were interested in analysing the advertisement at all. For example, in my interview with Riku (a pseudonym), age 14, he said in a visual arts class that he was tired of just viewing advertisements hanging on the wall and making analyses: „It would be much more fun to do something and not just go through ads.” When I asked if he found analysing advertisements interesting at all, he answered unequivocally, „no.” Sometimes teachers had to force students to do some analysis. One example is from the movie course where students were supposed to do an analysis of the Finnish film *Beauty and the Bastard* (*Tyttö sinä olet tähti*, 2005). At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher explained what film narrative means and how it works and gave students some questions to answer. Instead of doing this, students preferred to continue their own video-making process and asked if it would be possible to edit their own videos at the same time. After some negotiations, the teacher decided that the students had to concentrate completely on the analysis.

### **Media production in a classroom**

Production, which includes making an advertisement, is a practical hands-on use of media technology (Buckingham, 2003). Students „write” the media text in an advertisement project with different techniques by using video cameras (video advertisement), still cameras (magazine advertisement) and other tools. As Buckingham (2003) emphasised, reading and writing the media should be inextricably connected. Media and digital literacy does not only mean interpreting media texts but also producing them in different contexts.

In the advertisement project, reading and writing the media was integrated with simulation. Students simulated the position of the advertiser. As a technique of media education or media teaching, simulation is a form of role play, where students are put in the position of media producers. Buckingham (2003) argued that it is particularly useful for addressing questions about production roles, processes of media industries, and technological, financial, and institutional constraints of productions. Simulation offers opportunities to understand the nature of representations and audiences when students, for example, produce their media productions from a particular perspective and for a particular audience.

### **Making an advertisement**

Rather than analysing, most students seemed to be keen on making their own media presentations. The assignment after the analysis for the students was to design an advertisement campaign for a product called „Jyty”. *Jyty* does not mean anything in Finnish, but it has some onomatopoetic connotations as something strong and powerful. The project required students to design the product, which was targeted at young people, produce an advertising campaign, and create an advertisement either in print or video format. The teacher gave written instructions for students:

#### Advertisement project, eighth grade

You are working at the advertisement agency (find a name for your agency!). You have got a job to plan a campaign for a new product called *Jyty* targeted to young people. *Jyty* is produced in Finland. As experts, teachers and students from the Department of Design at the Aalto University are involved. It is a completely Finnish product.



For an advertisement campaign, you should write a:

- Description of the product: a possible information label and technical information;
- Plan for marketing the product in Finland (how many ads, channels, timetable, point of time, duration, etc.);
- Representation of what will be told about the product;
- Draft of a magazine ad; and
- Draft of a television ad.

The time was limited, and there was no opportunity to go into deeper dialogue, even though some questions caused lots of comments. The teacher explained how some trends are used in ads and gave an example of car advertisements, where the trend is to be environmentally friendly. The teacher emphasised that it would be good if students considered environmental topics, such as re-cycling and energy saving in their advertising campaign.

After examples and instructions, the students' group work started. The initial ideas within the groups were quite innovative technological devices: a dishwasher that cleans itself, a remote control than can be used as a phone, a massage bathrobe, a vibrating dish brush and so forth. The teacher wondered how these items would be targeted at young people. She commented to me later that these kinds of creative assignments usually begin in chaos. Students argue with each other, and the noise level rises when they try to find out what they will do, how they will do it and who will do what. She said, „A comprehensive school is a place where students have the right to do things in practice, and not just read something about advertisements from the textbook.” She added that this kind of learning by doing is no longer common and that „books are heavier” and that there are more and more themes to teach.

One group decided to make a television advertisement of the Jyty sports drink. A student, Simo (a pseudonym), tried to establish a slogan for the ad with the group: „Jyty gives you brains.” The conversation continued between the group and the teacher (all names are pseudonyms):

*Tarja:* I think that we can make [a video] if we can do texts by Movie Maker in time.

*Teacher:* Yes, everybody can use it [Movie Maker] at home.

*Hannu:* How many hours do we have to do the video?

*Teacher:* Three hours.

*Hannu:* Three hours, okay.

*Teacher:* Thus your video is ready. Remember that if you do a video, you have to have a product. You have to have a bottle to drink from and a label, and the Jyty text has to be ready next week.

Students began to consider whether a bottle or a can would be better. Simo called out that he could design a label with his computer at home.

This extract shows that students began to think what could be done at home and with their own computers. They did not have much time in school, and they had to do some work off school and off the timetable. Most of the groups later said that they did not have enough time, and that is why they had to make some compromises. When students make their own projects, the time flies and the space-time structure of the school is not enough. Teachers know this very well, but they are not able to change the structure, as can be discerned from the teacher's discourse in class: „Now it is time to start to clean your tables, and on Wednesday, we shall continue.” The students begin to gather paperboards, pens, cameras, cell phones and other stuff. One group was still in the school's gym where they were shooting their video. The teacher told me that they had lost their sense of time in the gym. One hour is really a short time. I asked what would happen if they stayed longer at the school? The teacher answered:

Students complain about that and there will be playing hooky. It depends what you are used to doing. If you do not know anything better, there will be no problems. These 45 minute classes – you try to find some extra material and examine it, and immediately you have to start to take it apart. It really is sometimes frustrating. In the upper secondary school, we had 75 minutes and it was much better. (From my notebook)

Time and space are always a problem in media education in schools. The school architecture and teaching schedule are not suitable for media production. This is one reason why teachers prefer books and writing assignments – and students make their productions off school and also publish their schoolwork on the Internet. Within traditional school settings, it is uncommon for students to be so proud of their schoolwork that they want to present it in public. But media productions are an exception; part of the nature of media projects is that they are published and circulated. When the afore-mentioned Jyty sports drink advertisement was ready, one of the group members published the video on his *YouTube* channel. The group even presented their advertisement in the mother tongue class by using *YouTube*. The teacher made some comments about the public publishing

of schoolwork, especially from the point of view of copyrights, noting that everybody who had a part in making the video should have given their permission for publishing. The video did not include any music, and thus music copyright was not a problem. The group members commented that they had an intention to make some music themselves, but they did not have any opportunities to do that at home.

Group members also presented their imaginary campaign plan, including when and how often they intended to show their advertisements on different television channels and some details about the Jyty product itself. Some groups had details from their production, for example, storyboards and special informative labels for their product. A group that designed a magazine advertisement campaign for Jyty breakfast cereal presented a rap for the product in the class. Others had made composition and music for their video, with their own lyrics as well. Students understood that music is an important part of an advertisement, even though the teacher did not mention it at the beginning of the project.

When the groups presented their campaigns and advertisements, they used language that appealed to health, humour, technological excellence, nationalism (made in Finland), environmental friendliness and so forth. These were also highlighted by the teacher at the beginning of the project. Students showed that they are familiar with the basic language of advertisements in general, but they had some problems conceptualizing what impact modes they used in their ads.

At the end of the project, every group had a feedback meeting with the teacher where they discussed the group work, problems, students' participation in the project, their products, the language and rhetoric that were used. A group that made a video advertisement of a weight loss cake understood the idea of weight-loss products very well. The teacher asked the group members how the product and the ad were targeted at young people. The girls in the group answered that young people have a lot of pressure to look good all the time, but they admitted that they did not remember to take young people into account in the advertisement. In the video, they played the roles of more middle-aged women. Actually, weight-loss products are usually targeted to middle-aged people, and it is more or less illegal and at least ethically problematic to target these kinds of products at young people because of the eating disorder issues that many young people face. Thus, the girls in the group used traditional rhetoric that they had seen in ads before. When the teacher asked how the language of advertisements worked in their ad, the girls remained silent for a long time. The teacher and the girls discuss the advertisement (all names are pseudonyms) below:

*Teacher:* Did you use effective impact modes of advertisement language? We discussed these modes at the beginning of the project.

*Mari:* I do not remember those.

*Teacher:* You wrote those down in your notebooks.

*Mari:* What were they?

*Teacher:* There were eight or something: humour, appealing to emotions, authority ...

*Satu:* We used humour ...

*Teacher:* Humour, yes you are right ... and you used a before-after structure.

All of the groups found it difficult to articulate and conceptualise the language they used. One problem with hands-on productions is that students easily become lost in their experience and practice. Therefore, the teacher also wanted to go back to conceptualise the means that students had used in their ads. The students were already knowledgeable and familiar with advertisements, but the assignment was supposed to „make the familiar strange” by deepening students’ conceptual understanding.

Conceptualizing is also one of the core approaches of literacy teaching (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). It is „a knowledge process in which learners become active conceptualizers, making the tacit explicit and generalizing from the particular” (para. 2). By conceptualizing their own work and choices, students learn to understand media texts and meaning-making from a broader perspective both when they „read” and „write” media. This was one of the main goals of the advertisement project.

## **Soap opera**

My second example of media education is from a Grade 7 mother tongue class, and the theme is soap opera. The class instruction was also a combination of reading and writing the media. The mother tongue teacher used different pedagogies to explore soap operas with the students. In the traditional way, the class started with the discussion and textbook reading. The seventh grade textbook in mother tongue included a learning area entitled, „Media and literature knowledge” (Mikkola, Luukka, & Ahonen, 2005). Part of the area was soap operas as storytelling. The textbook included a rather long article about the history, structure and characteristics of soap opera and even some findings from Finnish researcher Tuija Virta (1994).

The academic reference was rather old, in a textbook that was published in 2005.

At the beginning of the class, the teacher drew a mind map from the textbook on the blackboard. The mind map included some typical characteristics of soap operas, and the students added more. They discussed product placement, milieu, stereotypes and cliff-hangers in the soap opera. Students easily found examples of these from on-going Finnish soap operas. The teacher gave some older examples from *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, which were unknown series to young students at that time. They analysed show time, characters and other dimensions of soaps. Students summarised soap operas in the following way:

*Student:* They [characters in the soaps] are hanging around with each other and falling in love with their neighbour living in the same block of flats, then leave that person and become pregnant and start a new relationship.

*Another student:* And she is killed meanwhile.

*Others:* And she comes alive again and notices that she had a relationship with her sister and brother. And has a heart attack when she hears that they are her sister and brother.

*Teacher:* Okay, a kind of causation, chain reaction.

The teacher also asked some questions about the typical plot of soap operas and why soap operas are filmed only in some particular places and indoors. All of this was explained in the book article, and the students had evidently read the text. They answered the teacher's question:

„There's no clear time structure; old and new get mixed.”

„There's no clear climax.”

To the question of filming indoors, one of the students referred straight to the textbook: „There was in the text [book] that when you watch the programme, it is like being at home, a familiar feeling.”

Soap operas are popular TV programs in Finland, even among children and young people. The daily Finnish soap opera *Secret Lives* (*Salatut elämät*) has been on the air since 1999, and every Finnish person knows at least something about it. It has been under public debate several times. For example, after the season finale in 2009, when a pregnant woman was buried alive, the Minister of Communications questioned the show's suit-

ability for young children. Students also remembered an episode in which a restaurant exploded and nobody knew which of the main characters was killed. The show has dealt with themes that have been under public debate, such as abortion, drug abuse, incest, alcoholism, and eating disorders. However, or therefore, the series has been popular with school children, from eight-year-olds upwards.

*Secret Lives* was part of students' everyday life and popular culture. Therefore, it offered a basis for questions of personal opinions, taste and affections. From the questions included in representational media education, the teacher moved ahead to the non-representational questions. He asked one question from the basis of research findings in the textbook: Why are students hooked on soap operas? The majority of the students gave plot and characters as reasons, but some said that watching soap operas is a kind of everyday routine. The teacher himself confessed that he was hooked on *Secret Lives* for about one and a half years. The teacher was one of the youngest teachers at the school and had a strong relationship with popular and media culture. He was able to share common experiences with students. Sometimes, a generation gap obstructs a dialogical discussion with teachers and students, especially when it comes to life experiences and media culture. But in this case, the teacher (who was also known for his interest in heavy rock) easily found examples that were close to the students' everyday lives. Pedagogy of media education and multiliteracies bring some new challenges to teachers. One of them is to bring one's own identity to the educational setting. Learning is situated in a community with people who are comfortable with themselves and who are flexible in collaborating with others (Boyd & Brock, 2015). Usually, this means that teachers are also able to talk about their personal tastes and media use.

At the end of the class, the teacher assigned group work from the textbook. The assignment was for the groups to generate an idea of their own soap opera and present it to others in the class. The teacher suggested that students should dramatise one scene from their soap opera and play it in the front of class. The next class was reserved for students' presentations and dramatised acts. Drama as a pedagogical means opens up a kind of combination of official and unofficial school space.

Drama education does not have any official position as a school subject in the Finnish core curriculum, but it has been an important part of the school system in spite of that (Toivanen, 2012). Drama is placed within the school subjects of mother tongue and literature as a sub-area of interaction skills. But it also has some meaning within media education as well, as in this case. Students had to think of, and explicate some typical characters

from media representations and apply them to their own presentation. The teacher said that teaching offers some means for analysing the text and that students know a lot, but „usually they do not know how much they really know and figure out.”

Students were extremely motivated to conceive and dramatise their soaps. They designed some spin-offs to their soaps, web pages (only on paper), music themes and plots. The teacher said that these kinds of assignments usually work with this class, but not with every class. The students were used to the use of drama as a pedagogical means and were not afraid to act.

The plots were as complicated, as in real soaps, and the relationships were confusing and humoristic. In the soap entitled *Secret Kebabs*, students explicated the series in the following way:

The series tells about young teenagers who are in the middle of complicated relationships. We are able to see humoristic and dramatic moments. The series also follows their parents' work at the restaurant. The story begins when an exchange student, Alex, comes to Finland to the family of Chris, and emotions begin to catch fire. How do the parents and Lisbeth react to the relationship of Alex and Chris and who is the jealous intriguer? How do their relationship and admirations affect their school life? What happens to the restaurant? Who is the mysterious Aso? (From students' text)

This soap opera seemed to be strongly influenced by the *Secret Lives* series; even the name was adapted from the series. This is an example of re-mixing culture that is an important part of young people's lives. This time, the main characters of their own soap were gay. This alludes to some themes in the *Secret Lives* series but also to the liberal thinking of the group, which included three girls who were 13 and 14 years old.

The group improvised a scene of their soap opera in front of the class. Other groups had similar kinds of dramatised scenes. One group even composed a music theme and recorded the music with a video camera. The girls in this group used their own video camera and brought it to school for their presentation. Once again, the school's media production was done off campus.

In their dramatised acts, students used the classroom space differently than in normal class. They were embodied young people who presented their stories to their peers rather than to the teacher. Usually, schoolwork and tests are done for the teacher by an individual student. Now the school



space was opened up in a more participatory context, where an individual learner was pushed aside and the mastery was not centred on the teacher. Students had a feeling that they belonged together and were doing something together. They laughed together and commented freely on each other's presentations. Each presentation was followed by spontaneous applause.

These kinds of dramatised acts are „participatory theatre” or „classroom drama,” in which the border between the performers and audience is obliterated (Toivanen, 2012). Every student is in turn an actor and a spectator. For Rancière (2009), this kind of shifting of actor and spectator is an emancipative act: „That is what the word *emancipation* means: the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body” (p. 19). For Rancière, the question is not so much about the theatre but rather education, where students actively make meaning and participate in the teaching/learning processes:

The spectator also acts, like pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by re-fashioning it in her own way – by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. (Ibid., p. 13)

According to Rancière (2009), blurring the boundary between acting and looking opens a „community of narrators”, an emancipated community in which the traditional roles of the teacher and students have been changed, and learning is seen more as an active use of the voice and students' own life experiences. Media education, and here drama teaching, can be seen as an opportunity to change these roles.

### **Animation workshop in visual arts class**

My third example of media education in secondary school is an animation workshop in a Grade 8 visual arts class. As seen already, creative media production is part of the everyday life of young people. The visual arts teacher reasoned that because students did so many different things at home, they were not self-evidently interested in doing the same things at



school, for example, making a short animated film, which has been an assignment for eighth grade students in visual arts for years. The animation course needed plenty of time and took several days. The teacher thought that students wanted to make the animation a little bit faster than before:

It's not a dramatic change, but I have noticed during these years that students would like to get ready a little bit faster, so that their motivation will continue. Problems are encountered with animations that take time. There is a contradiction: Is there any sense just to do short projects and clips and not go deeply to the core of animation? It may stay superficial. (Interview with a male visual arts teacher)

According to the teacher, the problem is not in analysis or motivation, but in the need for students to concentrate for a long period of time. Other teachers also said that making media in the official school context is sometimes difficult. Students do not always come up with good ideas about what to do, or they spend time arguing in the working groups.

Moreover, so called defensive teaching and learning in traditional schooling may affect students who may more or less pretend inability. In their ethnographic study in U.S. high schools, Garrison and Bromley (2004) found that students sometimes acted as though they were unable or unwilling to do computer assignments. This was because teachers restricted and controlled students' every single act by telling them what to do and when. Defensive teaching expands control beyond the necessary and stifles the motivation for learning. Students may resist excessive authority in terms of how they learn at school and accomplish this in different ways, for example, by „acting busy” and feigning inability. This is an example of students' general resistance to schooling by using school technology in the wrong way or showing total unwillingness. They just do not want to follow the teachers' structured ways of guidance when asked to follow step-by-step directions. Students prefer to do their own thing and to do it outside school if the school does not offer opportunities for that.

But teachers have specific goals that they want students to reach. In an animation course, students are supposed to learn basic technical skills of animation production. The visual arts teacher emphasised that the goal of visual arts is to teach media as a means to produce something. The difference between mother tongue and visual arts classes, according to the teachers, is that in mother tongue, students learn more media literacy and about the media. The core curriculum for visual arts has some technological emphasis, but in the school, the resources are limited:

We had plans that we can get one video camera, for example, every other year, four per visual arts class all together – in other words, eight camcorders. If we have 26 students each, it is at least a minimum that we have four camcorders per class so that we are able to do at least something. But nothing happens. (Interview with the male visual arts teacher)

The animation course was conducted with three camcorders and laptops using iMotion software. These camcorders were all that the two visual arts classes had together. ICT and mother tongue courses also had one camcorder each. Because of the lack of camcorders, the group sizes in the animation course were quite large, about eight students per camera. The teachers said that the work had been much easier and faster in years past when they had more camcorders.

The idea of the animation course was metamorphosis without any specific content. Metamorphosis is a unique form of animation, which involves literally changing an image into a completely different image through the evolution of the line. Metamorphosis creates fluid linkages of images through the process of animation itself, without editing (Wells, 1998). For example, in the animation films produced in the class, we see a ball's transformation into a balloon, kite and airship. Interestingly, the evolution of the line can constitute narrative constructions, and students seemed to be conscious of these possibilities.

When I arrived at the class, all the students were working. Some were drawing images, some were filming an animation, and some were recording sound effects. The teacher explained for one group how to use Garage-Band software for recording and editing sounds:

We do not choose *Software* but a *Real Instrument* from the menu bar. If we have a guitar, we could plug it in, but we are only speaking and we choose *Vocal*. I choose here *No Effects*. We could choose something that changes the sound a little bit. By clicking *Create*, we create a track. After that, we are able to use the track. The microphone is here [pointing to the inbuilt microphone]. We can speak, beat something or do anything else – whatever you need. (Teacher's instruction)

As the students were listening, the teacher took a piece of paper and crumpled it in front of the microphone. Somebody asked how they would be able to transfer that sound to their animation film. The teacher explained that the sound had to first be transferred to the editing software FinalCut:

In FinalCut, we can edit your sound or music and put in the track in the place where you want it to be. You can edit it afterwards, as you will. But I'll give you some advice: Try to put it roughly in the right place when you are recording and watching your film. Another group did so by having two laptops side by side, and they watched for where they would need a special sound, like a slam. (Teacher's instruction)

After this short guidance, the group was immediately ready to record sounds. Students tried to simulate the sound of fencing using chisels they found in the classroom.

As the teacher said, students were practicing new software and new means of creating animation films. They were not familiar with IStop-Motion, GarageBand or FinalCut software, but they quickly determined how to use the software for their means. Willet (2009) argued that these kinds of software involve scaffold learning. Learning the software is usually intuitive. Different software packages have the same kind of logic and menu bars with options, and young people are used to learning by a trial and error method.

In a way, the learning was similar to learning from video games. James Paul Gee (2007) outlined several different learning principles that are inherent in gaming; for example, learning through gaming is active, meaningful, multi-modal and scaffolded, and it entails participation. He argued that learning happens in the context of an activity rather than through abstract exercises and textbook reading and is therefore more effective. However, the students were not alone with the new software and animation techniques. The teacher gave step by step instructions whenever needed and helped students solve problems. In fact, learning during the animation course was a combination of teacher's instructions, trial and error, technology enhanced scaffolding and peer based learning. Working in groups requires communication between the students and simulates the way they learn outside school with each other in different networks.

During the animation course, the metamorphosis of the line was not the only metamorphosis. At the same time, we saw a metamorphosis of the school space and classroom into an animation studio. Students worked freely in groups, and the teacher gave some instruction if students needed it. Students who were drawing pictures for an animation listened to music and kept their mobile phones on their desks ready for text messaging and other communication with peers. From time to time, a few of the students asked the whole class to be silent while they were recording sound effects. Others respected this request commendably.

## Learning by doing

School has to compete with other media ... If young people play games and hang out on Facebook or something like that, their reality is so full of stimulation. They get new and exciting things every moment. At school, this means definitely that we have to work hard in order to keep students tuned so that stimuli in school correspond to their reality. If you think that when the teacher is talking and nearly 30 people are listening, it is, in a way, a really passive situation. How can a student react? They are silent and write and ask questions one at a time. School reality does not correspond to that – in their free time, they can be agents all the time and decide what they do. I think that contrast is huge. (Interview with the history and social science teacher 1, a male)

The history and social science teacher emphasises here the *agency* of students, which is not self-evident in traditional school settings. He recognises the agency that young people have outside the school, especially in their own media practices. In an interview, he said that he tries to use different pedagogy than pure frontal teaching with questions and answer sessions. He saw the gap between the traditional school and students' culture and tried to „awake a will to listen and learn” with visual pedagogy where he used Power Point presentations, maps, animations, photographs, and clips from the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) TV archive.

I try to activate students to increase their knowledge and experiences or something like that. But it could not always be something that „hey, now we play games” or something like that. If I could, I always try to find some way to regenerate. In history class, I sometimes even try to develop some games, for example I have explained the risks and problems of investing in stocks with the help of a game. (Interview with the history and social science teacher 1, male)

Both history and social science teachers at the school had an open attitude towards new and partly experimental teaching methods. They gave students the opportunity to use their media practices and, for example, to make videos and animations instead of written essays. For example, a student (Gomi, a pseudonym) used her gifts and made visual narratives for the history and social science class. In the seventh grade, she made an animation film about the 1904 assassination of Russian Major General

Nikolay Bobrikov in Finland. In the ninth grade, she made a short film for a social science class.

The Grade 8 social science students had a „life career assignment”, in which they were free to use any kind of content and material from popular culture. Social science education in Finland is based on the different branches of social sciences: political science, economy, social policy, sociology and law (Virta & Yli-Panula, 2012). In education, these are related to content as well as to an understanding of basic concepts. In the practice of teaching, attention is given to society both at the macro level (parliament, the government, voting, economics, law and municipal services) and at the micro level and to how young people encounter social decision making and economic issues in their everyday life (ibid.). The assignment was targeted at the micro level. Students had to present the life history of a fictive person within society, where different normative situations are based on law. Students had to learn, for example, about different legal issues that come into play when one is considering the birth of a child, compulsory education, marriage, divorce, child and housing benefits, and so forth. Students used different media platforms and social networking sites to present different life histories, for example, through magazines, animations, children's books, posters, photographs, Facebook sites, and Habbo. The students were seemingly pleased to have invented something that others had not. The teacher explained this assignment in the following way:

The starting point was that first, issues in social science are fragmented but they are related to each other ... We speak about autonomous learning. I see that a student really has to deal with information and find information, understand it, and make a big picture of it. A student has to be active and go through these things ... This is especially true for students who under-achieve in tests or just do not learn from books or can't write proper answers. Many students that are not so good at tests are good at this. (Interview with the social science teacher 2, a male)

The teacher added that students work so hard that it is almost cruel to assess their work in the school's traditional manner. He mentioned that „in the beginning, working is just a mess and it seems that they can't do anything, but when the due date comes, they bring really fine work.” Students do almost all the work out of school with their own devices and home computers. Some students, such as Gomi, even published their productions on the Internet on their own social networking sites.

The assignment is a classical example of the „learning by doing” pedagogy, which of course, has its own challenges: it takes time and space. Students may find it difficult to receive personal guidance from the teacher because there are so many students in the classroom, and the teacher can find it difficult to assess students’ very different presentations.

Another „learning by doing” assignment I observed was a newspaper project in a seventh grade history class. Newspapers provide classical learning material in Finnish schools, as we have already seen. Actually, Finnish newspapers have almost 50 years of experience in cooperating with schools. The Finnish Newspaper Association has arranged a special Newspaper Week every February since 1994. During Newspaper Week, schools can order local newspapers free for every student. The Finnish Newspaper Association also publishes pedagogical material for teachers to lower the thresholds for the adaption of newspapers as a part of a school day. In recent years, newspapers have also taken young readers into account by publishing news and reports during Newspaper Week that are targeted especially at children and youth. Some newspapers have also used young people as journalists.

In 2010, a history teacher conducted a newspaper project during newspaper week. The assignment was to design headlines and a front page from 19th century historical events, such as the Finnish War (1808–1809), the Diet of Porvoo (1809), the Grand Principality of Finland (1809–1917) or the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815). Students had to find the most interesting and important information about the historical events and write an article using the genre of short news. The teacher commented that „students are used to hands-on projects. Why not utilise their skills?”

Seventh grade students were eager to start working on their „own newspaper”, and most groups started to design the front page visually and by drawing images. Some spent a lot of time trying to write using Fraktur. The teacher showed examples of fonts that were used in old newspapers. Even though the fonts were old in students’ work, the journalistic style was new. For example, the *Aamulehti* that students „edited” had learned that there was a scandal in the Congress of Vienna. The headline was as follows: „In a dancing congress people danced dirty way.” Students played with the words „säätty” (estate) and „säädtyön” (dirty/out-of-estate). Another newspaper published a Gallup Poll: „Do you want the regime of Russia? Answer by mail post.” Students used a lot of humour and tried to find clever historical jokes.

Once again, the assignment required space and time that was not suitable for traditional school settings with 45-minute sequences and small school tables. Learning by doing is not simply a task to be implemented in

official school spaces; it can provide a personal learning process. It goes far beyond a simple information transfer and contextualises the meaning of the subject matter in a new way.

The assignment in the history class was a kind of remixing process. It restructured the context of content in a similar way as remixing shifts any context, like adding comedy music to a horror film. This kind of work puts meaning to the contextualization, where learning is focused not so much on an interpretation of *what* something means but *where* it has meaning and how it changes (Thomas & Brown, 2011). Thomas and Brown (2011) wrote that this kind of learning is an act of imaginative play – the „how” of information that is needed, especially in the age of the Internet and digital culture. We need the skills to find and evaluate information in different contexts, where no guarantee of the truth of the information is given. Meaning can be manipulated in different contexts, and we have to gain awareness of the play and possible reconstructions of the context.

## Discussion

Burn and Durran (2007) made a reference to Mimi Ito’s idea that media literacies are partly learned, as spoken language in peer to peer social ecologies and in cultural practices. They argued that students’ familiarity with media culture and their own engagement with media production outside of school is something that teachers should meet halfway. Students’ media tastes and skills will meet the school culture of media literacy, and this „meeting” is important to recognise and supervise, for example, in curriculum based media productions. Burn and Durran (ibid.) suggested that this kind of „dialogue between cultures” can progress media literacy in cultural development. This may be one reason, for example, that advertisements have such an important role in media teaching at school: They are part of everybody’s experience and are easy to adopt in the school and to the context of media education.

Media education is a student based approach in the dialogue between youth culture and school culture. But at the same time, familiar media experiences should be made strange and be studied from a new point of view. Students are not especially keen to make media analysis because it ventures out of their comfort zone and beyond their basic media use and taste. Still, it is a basic goal of media education to help students conceptualise media experiences and become media literate.



The role of media education is often seen from this perspective of critical literacy. For example, in the United States, critical media literacy is built both on cultural studies and critical pedagogy (Share, 2009). From this point of view, critical media literacy is tied to the ideas of radical democracy and is concerned with developing skills and abilities that enhance democratisation and civic participation. At schools such as the Maple School, media education was seen by teachers, especially from this critical perspective, as an opportunity to critically analyse media text, especially advertisements and journalistic articles.

However, in recent years, as Burn and Durran (2007) pointed out, there has been a shift in emphasis from the traditional critical dimensions of media education to the production of media texts in educational settings. I add that this change is at least a small step towards participatory culture, where people are said to be active producers of the culture and are able to share and distribute their media productions in public spheres, such as the Internet and *YouTube*. The starting point for production is not the technology, but the content: what students have to say and how.

Here, the role of teachers is extremely important. Soep and Chávez (2010) write about *collegial pedagogy*, which creates a joint learning environment in which students and teachers may deepen their learning experience: „Under collegial pedagogy, young people and adults actually make work together, revealing their investments and vulnerabilities to one another in concrete ways” (p. 55). Students and teachers are free to show that they do not know everything and that they need each other to find solutions and make media productions. Some curriculum based media productions in the Maple School demonstrated this in practice and gave the students more room to use their skills and competences in the classroom. The school and its digital learning environment could be a new meeting point for students’ own media practices and teachers’ media knowledge. This changes the role of both parties, establishes a more collegial relationship and brings some „real-world” technology use to the school. My study suggests that school is changing little by little via the media practices that young people bring to it. But students still need teachers to help them enhance their skills and to understand the media and the surrounding digitalised media culture and society.



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